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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - August 31, 2005

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk over the past week.

International Relations

¶2. Parliamentarians Extremely Critical of USG Response to Hurricane Katrina

On September 1, Chairman of the Commission for International Affairs and National Security of the Upper Chamber of Parliament Nikolai Cherginets condemned American efforts at coping with the crisis caused by hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Cherginets asserted that the Bush Administration is clearly unable to handle emergency situations, as evidenced by the thousands of unevacuated residents of New Orleans, the lack of food and clean water, and the bodies visible floating down the flooded streets. According to Cherginets, this situation will prevent Bush being re-elected for a third term. Sergei Kostyan of the Lower Chamber of Parliament stated that "the American regime is rotten". However, the GOB announced that it is willing to help the U.S. through this difficult time, and Lukashenko expressed his condolences to President Bush. On September 2, GOB officials on two occasions opened meetings with CDA by expressing condolences.

¶3. Travel to Syria

On August 24, Belarus and Syria signed an agreement on visa-free travel between the two countries for Belarusian and Syrian holders of diplomatic and official passports. Ruslan Yesin, spokesman for the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said the agreement will increase the number of exchanges of official delegations.

¶4. Never Lose Ukraine

On August 28, after meeting with Ukrainian President Yushchenko, Lukashenko admitted that there are problems between Belarus and Ukraine, but assured that the relationship will never sour. The presidents are ready to solve bilateral problems and bring the countries closer together. Yushchenko agreed to draw up possible solutions to Belarus-Poland tensions. Yushchenko and Lukashenko also discussed easing border crossing formalities and Belarus' role in seaport construction on the Crimea.

¶5. More Money in Russia, More Economic Equality in Belarus

On August 25, newspaper Pravda reported that average pay in Russia is higher than in Belarus, but that Belarusian

social stratification is less than Russian. Experts say that this is partly due to the GOB's avoidance of "shock therapy" after the fall of communism and their refusal to accept privatization and a market economy. The World Bank underlined the instability of Belarus' economic growth, citing high production costs, government regulations, an underdeveloped banking sector and a lack of foreign reserves.

16. Indian Trade Show

On August 26, Emboffs attended the opening ceremony of a four-day trade show in Minsk highlighting Indian goods. The Indian Embassy and the Confederation of Indian Industry hosted the event. The Indian Charge d'Affaires and the Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister praised their mutual political support, but lamented low trade levels. Exhibits included tea sellers, instant rice producers, bicycles and hand tool companies.

17. North Korean Nukes Are Bad

On August 30, during a trip to South Korea, the Chairman of the Belarusian Council of the Republic Gennady Novitsky announced that the GOB is concerned over North Korea's nuclear program. He believes that success of the six-party talks depends on participants' abilities to align their positions based on the UN's principle of sovereign equality for all countries.

Human Rights

18. Activist Fined

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On August 30, judge Nikolai Senko of Brest fined the pro-democracy Party of Belarusian Communists (PBC) activist Anatoly Novik USD 475 for holding an unauthorized meeting. The PBC held the July 9 meeting to select candidates to the single candidate national congress. Novik plans to appeal the fine, arguing that the BPC is entitled to hold scheduled meetings in its office and that the judge violated the law by not allowing Novik to record the trial.

Economics

19. Belarus May Cooperate

On August 25, International Trade Center (ITC) representative Daniel Ivarsson announced that the ITC plans to work with the National Marketing and Price Center to develop Belarusian exports and raise the competitive capacity of Belarusian products abroad. Ivarsson commented that Belarus already relies on the ITC for information about the condition of foreign markets and foreign trade rules.

110. No More Corruption

On August 25, Lukashenko spoke out against corrupt officials, saying that bribery and other economic crimes damage the government and cause economic damage to the country as a whole. He noted that Belarus has a lower rate of economic crime and corruption than neighboring countries, but this is still too much. He warned that corrupt government officials will be severely punished.

111. Tax Reduction

On August 30, the Council of Ministers announced plans

to reduce the overall tax burden on economic entities by 0.8 percent. In accordance with new draft legislation, on January 1, banks must adopt uniform rules of profit tax collection, and the GOB will annul excise duty on crude oil and fuel sales taxes.

Education

¶12. Curb the Youth's Initiative

On August 27, Minsk Mayor Mikhail Pavlov demanded that administrators of schools keep students out of politics. He continued that "young people are easy to get involved in political processes, but that directors and rectors must do everything possible to avoid that."

¶13. The More Propaganda, The Better

On August 30, Education Minister Aleksandr Radkov announced that the Ministry will provide first-grade pupils with the textbook "My Motherland Belarus" as a gift from the President. Lukashenko finds this to be an "interesting textbook on Belarusian state ideology". The Ministry will prepare similar textbooks for older students.

Anti-US

¶14. U.S. Instigates Anti-Belarus Poland

On August 26, pro-government weekly Obozrevatel asserted that the U.S. caused Poland's anti-Belarusian actions. Anton Ksenov stated that, "it's not a secret to anyone that the U.S. is helping Poland in all aspects." According to Ksenov, the U.S. is using Poland as a conduit or implementer of American democratic principles in CIS countries.

¶15. No Americans in Belarus

On August 29, state daily Narodnaya Gazeta speculated that Americans may be blocked from entering Belarus prior to the presidential elections. Anatoly Gridnev says this is due to U.S. Ambassador Krol's statements that the USG will provide funds for election observation. Gridnev asserts that this is now illegal under the new presidential decree on foreign assistance.

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Miscellaneous

¶16. Stalin, Come On Down

On August 30, Russian TV reported on efforts in Svislach to restore decorations with Stalin's name and include his bust in the alley of heroes. Authorities say the returning, and even adding, of Stalin to the facades of buildings and historical monuments is not ideology, but is the resurrection of history for the memory of the people. On one building, Stalin's name now appears 15 times, when originally it was not on the building at all.

¶17. "You Will Win"

On August 25, Lukashenko announced that Belarusian athletes are able to win at least eight medals in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. He said that the state supports all sports and warned athletes not to complain about

"poor conditions" because the Soviet team always "shone in the international arena" and the state of their sports fields were no better than current ones.

¶18. Only State Modeling Agency Receives License

On August 30, the Ministry of Education (MoE) announced that only the state-run modeling agency successfully obtained a new license after Lukashenko's decree on slave trade and trafficking. Out of 18 modeling schools, only the National Beauty School met conditions of specialized educational facilities and highly educated staff. All other agencies failed to register. For example, the MoE denied a license to the Sergei Nagorny Fashion Studio and recommended that the Studio introduce law, economy, computer and psychology to its syllabus, then reapply.

¶19. Overrun by Beavers...We Think

On August 30, Dr. Petr Kozlo of the Zoology Institute declared that the beaver population of Belarus has outgrown its optimal level. He said environmentalists have not counted the beavers for at least ten years, but that there could be up to 45,000 beavers. Kozlo blamed the alleged beaver explosion on new fashion trends, which have made fur less popular. He suggested forcibly reducing the quantity of beavers by 15 percent in the next two years.

Quote of the Week

¶20. On August 25, press secretary of the Union State Ivan Makushok criticized plans of Poland, Ukraine, Latvia and Lithuania to coordinate their policies on Belarus.

"This is the development of the crusade against President Lukashenko and against Moscow, which started in Georgia, went to Ukraine, and now Belarus is on the way. But such a compact and stable state as Belarus would be welcome in the EU, if compared to the uneasy Ukraine."

Phlipot